SÁLIM ALI

As a child, Sálim Ali took partridges and other fowl from the family kitchen, to make an aviary in the garden. Growing up, he decided that he would make his passion for nature, and especially birds, his profession. At a time when being a naturalist was something few people did for a living, Sálim Ali decided to invent his own job: conducting detailed surveys of the bird life in different regions of the country. Working without a salary, he travelled tirelessly, to hills, deserts, forests and grasslands, observing, listening and analysing.

Sálim Ali's systematic surveys and fascinating books on Indian birds introduced thousands of people to the wealth of the natural world around them.

OTHER ACK VISIONARIES

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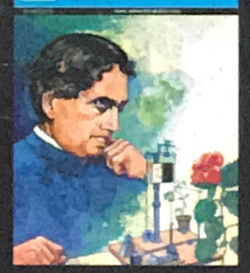

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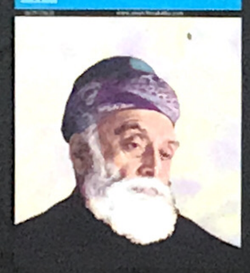

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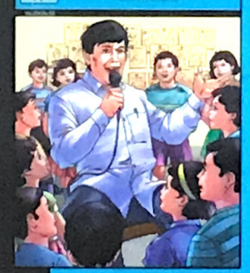

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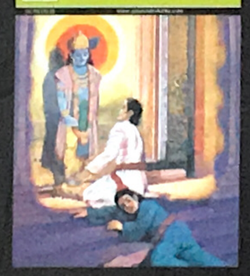

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VISIONARIES

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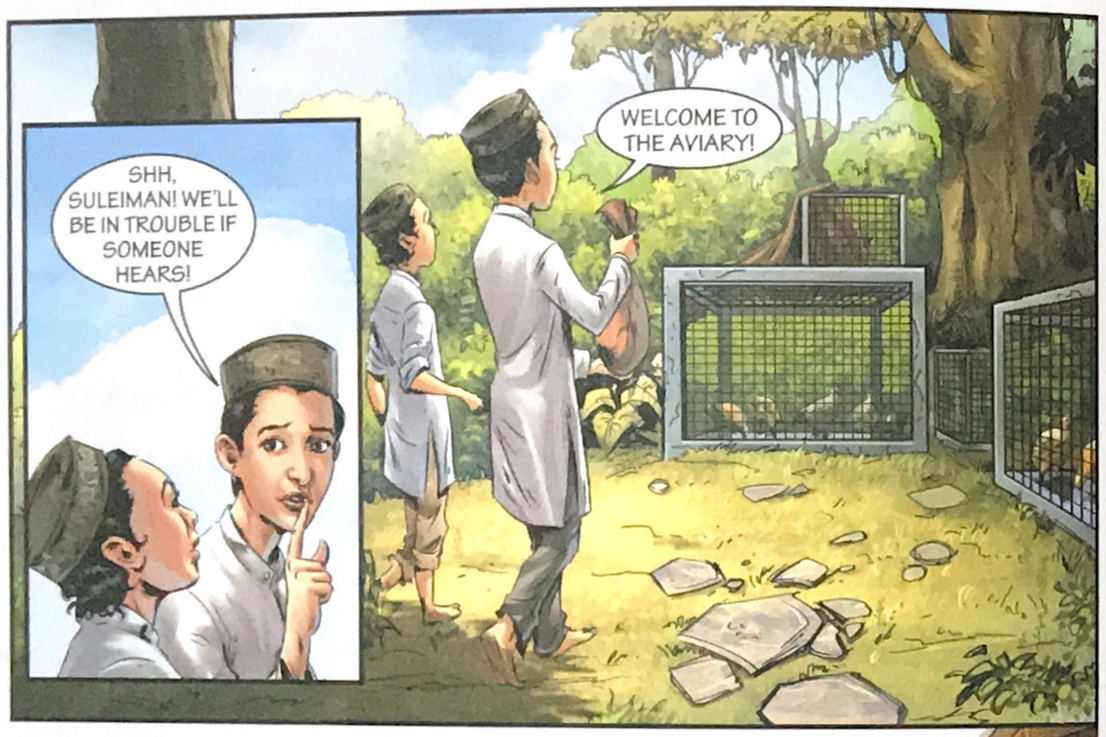
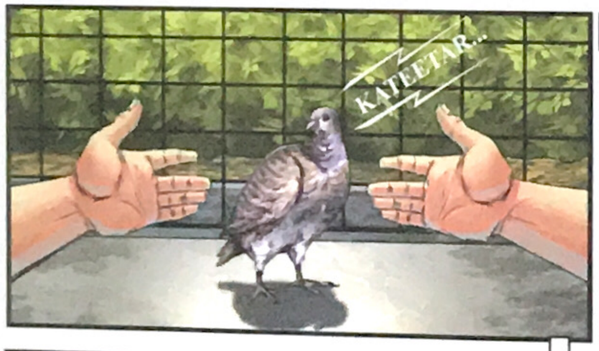
* PRONOUNCED SAA-LIM
^ NOW CALLED MUMBAI



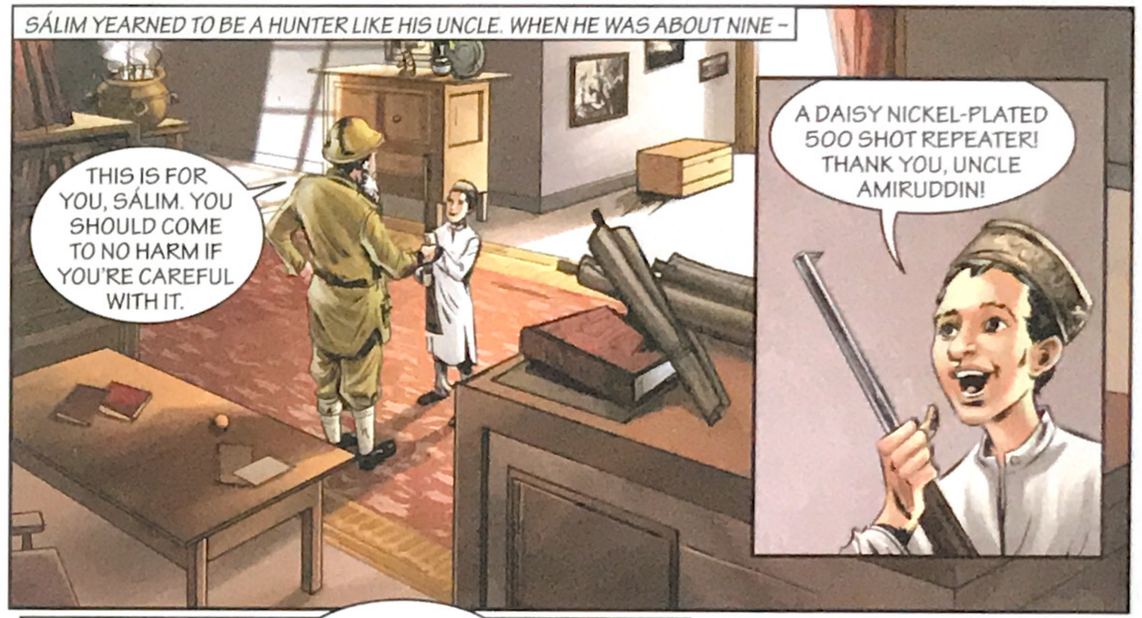


SÁLIM AND HIS NEPHEW SULEIMAN SPENT HOURS WATCHING THEIR PETS.

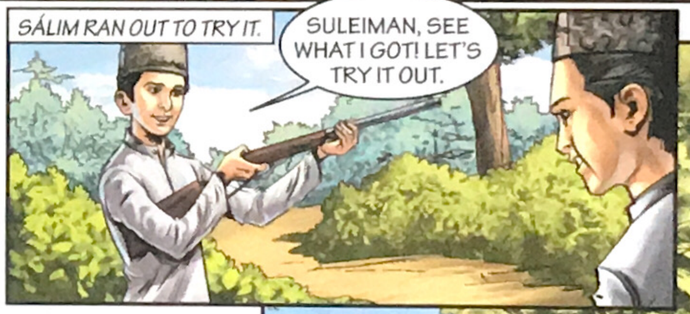
AMIRUDDIN WAS A KEEN SHIKARI.

AT THE TIME, BOMBAY WAS SURROUNDED BY FORESTS. PEOPLE HUNTED FOR FOOD AND BECAUSE IT WAS CONSIDERED A GENTLEMAN'S SPORT.

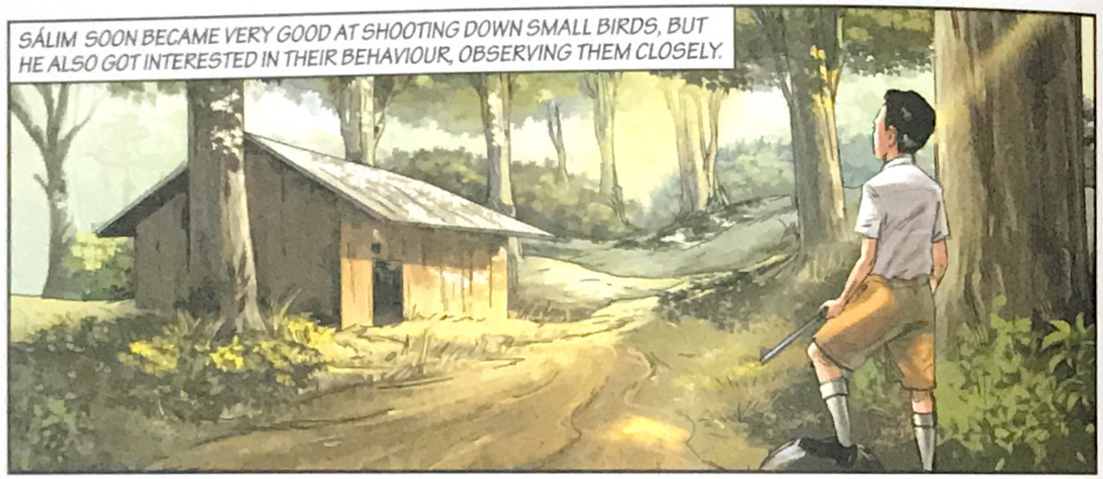
SÁLIM YEARNED TO BE A HUNTER LIKE HIS UNCLE. WHEN HE WAS ABOUT NINE –

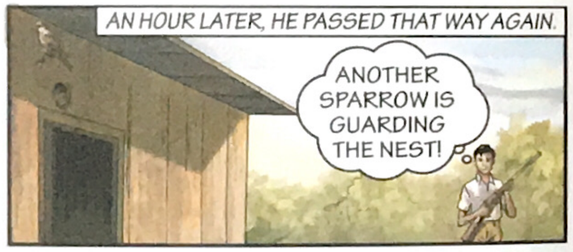


SÁLIM RAN OUT TO TRY IT.



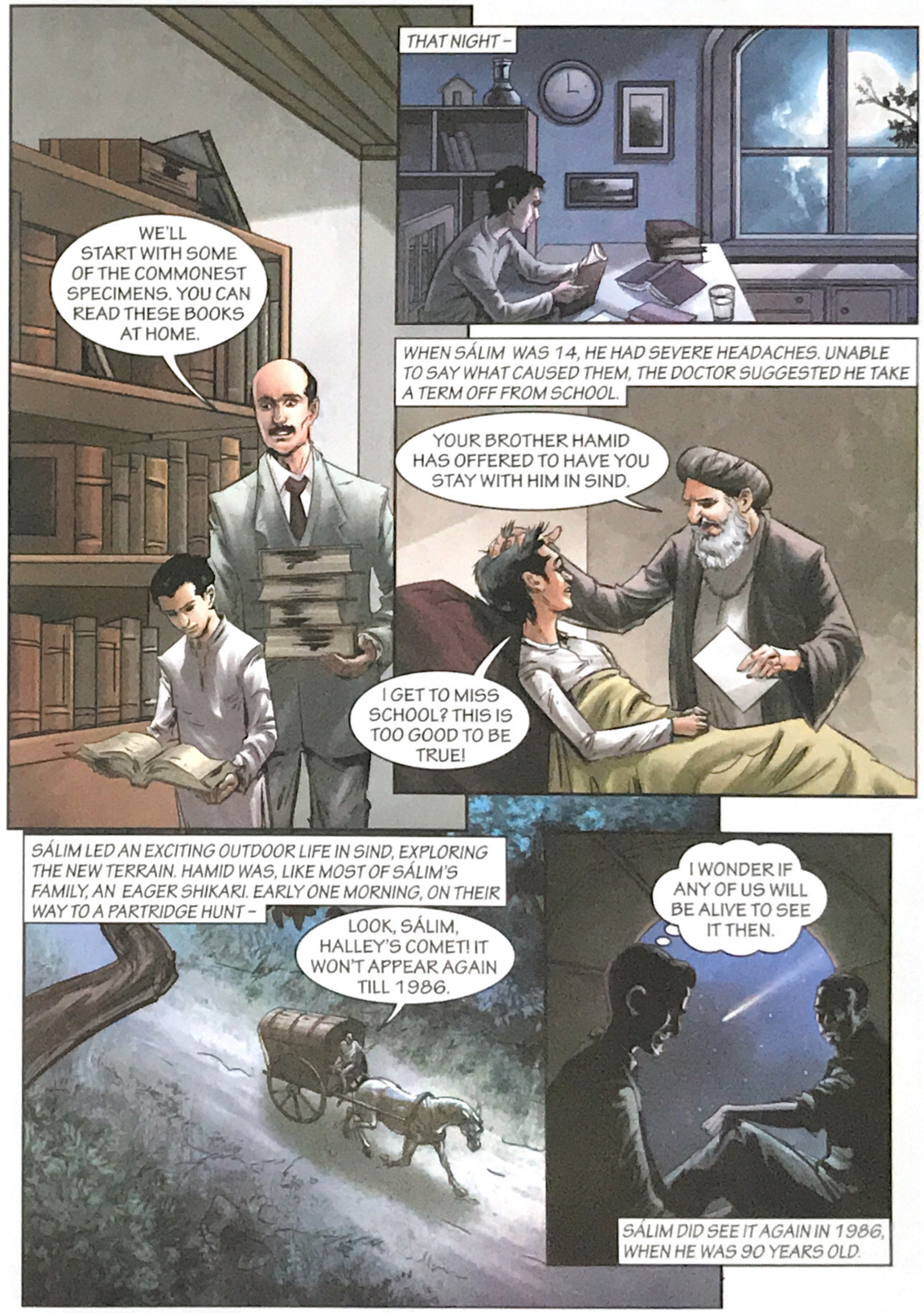
SÁLIM PRACTISED ON THE BIRDS NEAR THEIR HOUSE.





*NANNOO WAS THE TYABJIS' COOK. HE WAS VERY FOND OF THE CHILDREN, EVEN HELPING SÁLIM WITH HIS AVIARY.
^ CLARIFIED BUTTER AND SPICES

* ALSO CALLED A CHESTNUT -SHOULDERED PETRONIA



BUT THE HOLIDAY ENDED, AND SÁLIM MOVED BACK TO BOMBAY. HE MATRICULATED IN 1913, AND JOINED ST XAVIER'S COLLEGE.

I WISH I COULD LEAVE COLLEGE AND BE A HUNTER, UNCLE.

BUT YOU WANT TO LEARN ZOOLOGY.

I DO, BUT WHY DO I NEED TO STUDY MATHS?

SÁLIM WAS IN LUCK.

YOUR BROTHER JABIR WANTS YOU IN BURMA. YOU'LL BE HIS PARTNER IN A NEW VENTURE, MINING WOLFRAM*.

SOUNDS INTERESTING!

BUSINESS CAN'T BE WORSE THAN COLLEGE MATHEMATICS. I'D LIKE TO SEE BURMA.

YOU'LL MISS YOUR EXAMS, SÁLIM.

SÁLIM LEFT BOMBAY IN SEPTEMBER 1914. HE TOOK A TRAIN TO CALCUTTA^ AND THEN A STEAMER ACROSS THE BAY OF BENGAL TO BURMA. HIS SISTER AKHTAR, AND HER HUSBAND SALAH, CAME TO MEET HIM.

SÁLIM!

HE STAYED WITH THEM, BEFORE MAKING THE TRIP UPRIVER TO TAVOY, WHERE JABIR LIVED.

* A RARE METAL, ALSO CALLED TUNGSTEN

^ NOW KOLKATA

IN TAVOY, SÁLIM WORKED HARD LEARNING THE BUSINESS. ON WEEKENDS HOWEVER HE WAS FREE TO EXPLORE THE COUNTRYSIDE.

HE OFTEN WENT TO ORCHARDS AND RUBBER PLANTATIONS, WHICH ATTRACTED A RICH VARIETY OF BIRD LIFE.

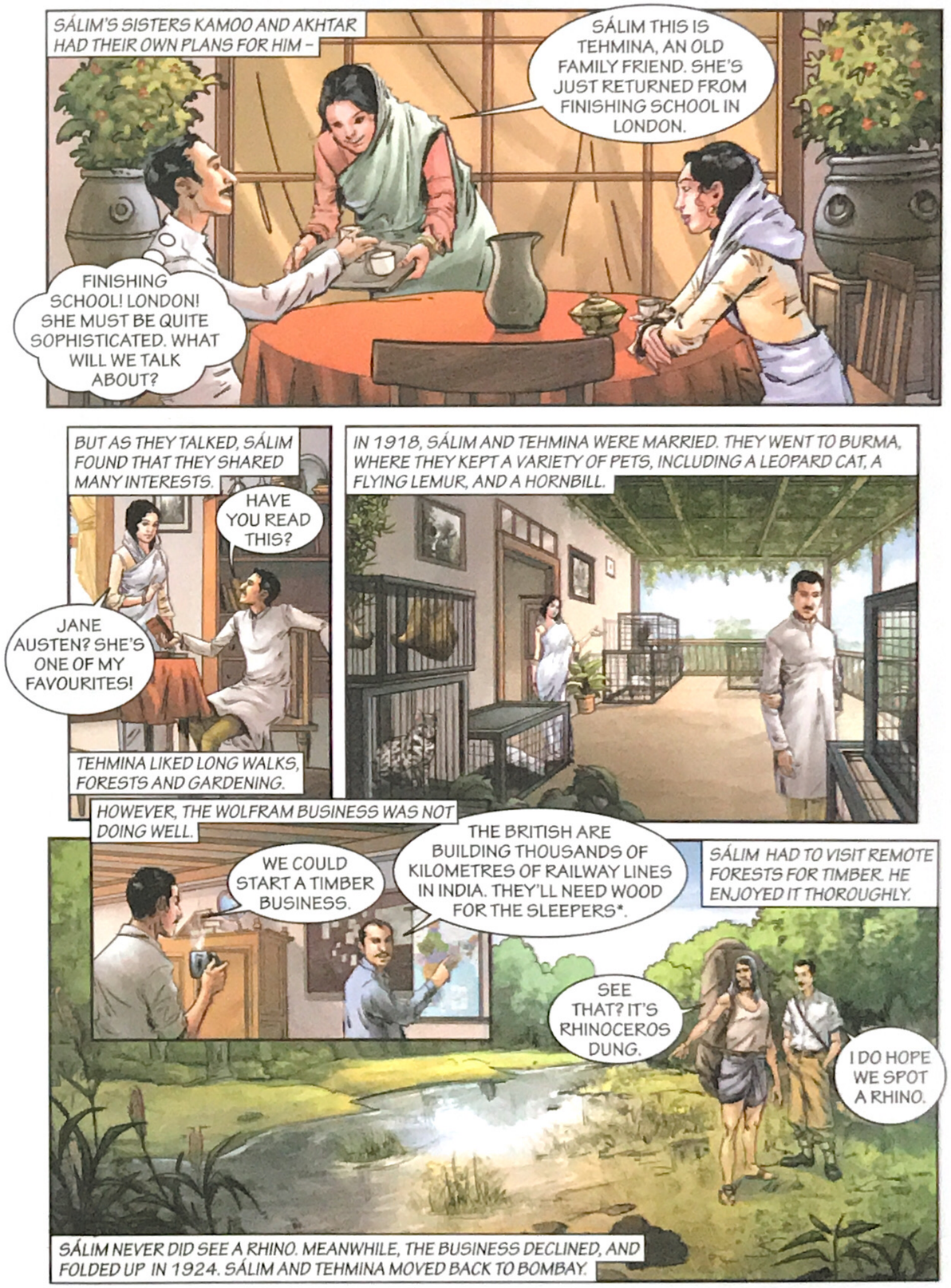
SÁLIM KNEW ALMOST NOTHING ABOUT BURMESE BIRDS. HE HAD NO BINOCULARS, AND THE ONLY BOOK HE HAD WAS NOT ILLUSTRATED.

IS IT? COULD IT BE ...?

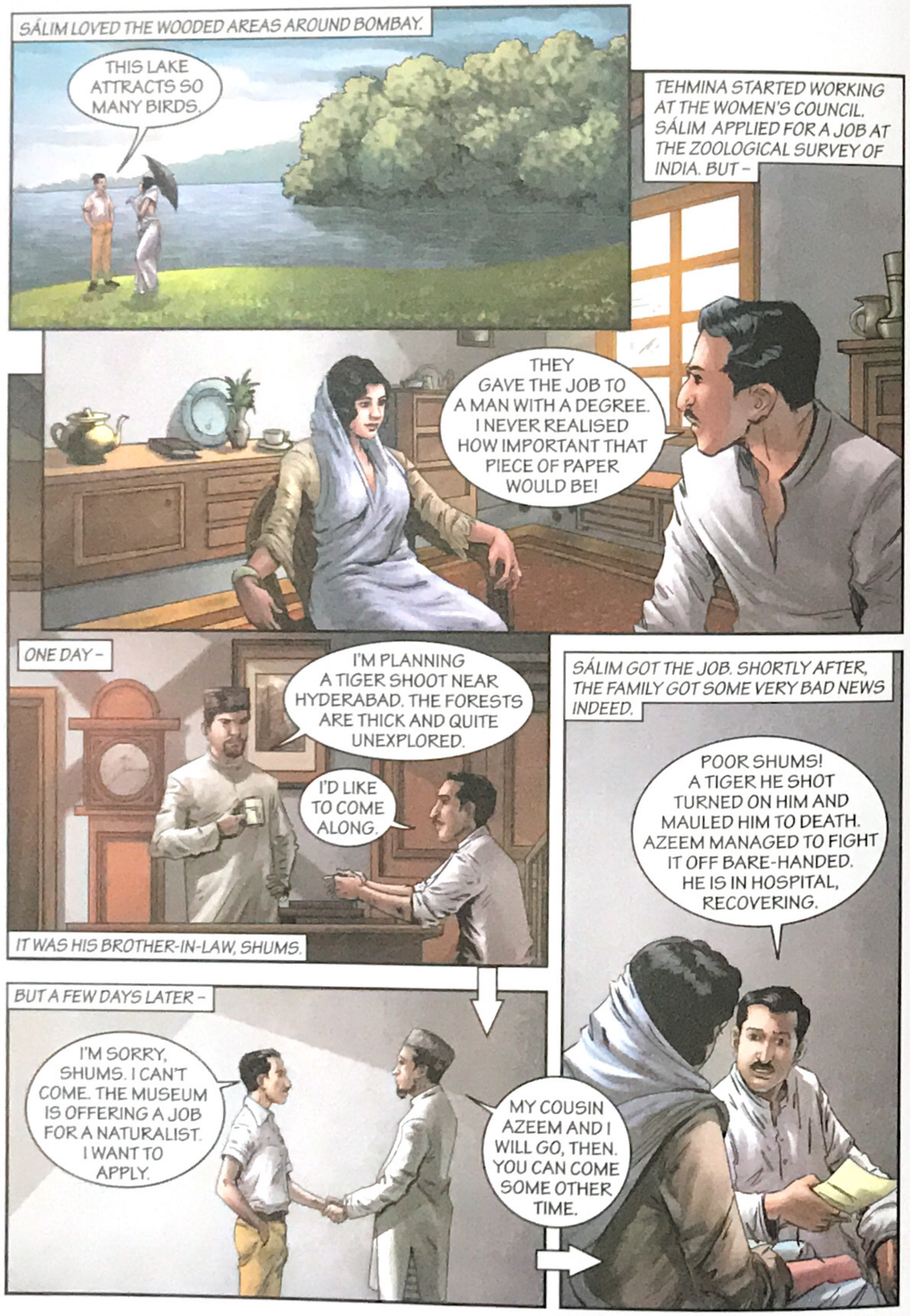
SO IT WAS A WHITE-WINGED BLACK JAY! THERE'S A CERTAIN SATISFACTION IN SPOTTING BIRDS DESPITE MY ILL-PREPAREDNESS.

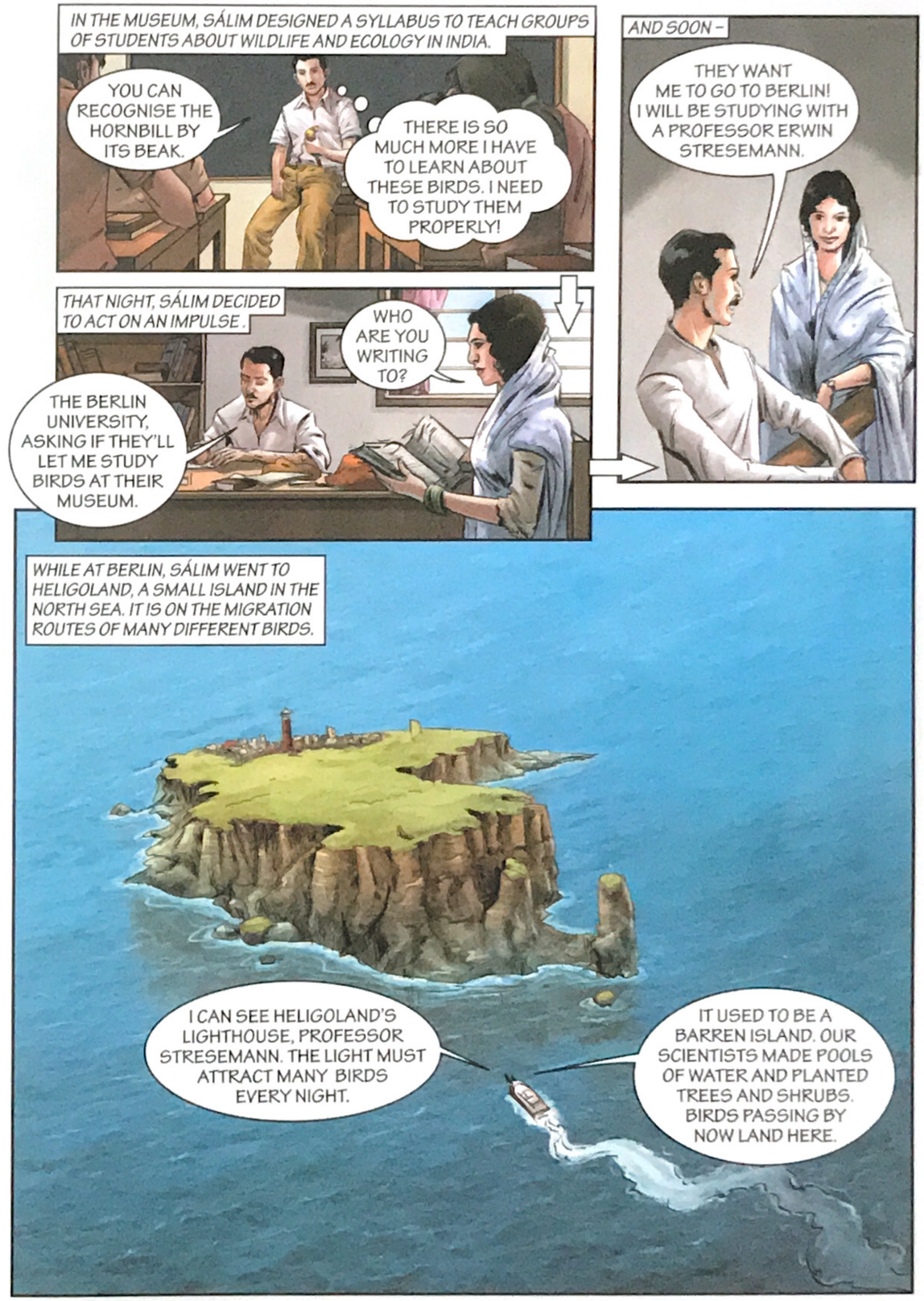
UNCLE AMIRUDDIN HAS PASSED AWAY. THE FAMILY FEELS THAT PERHAPS I SHOULD GO TO COLLEGE NOW.

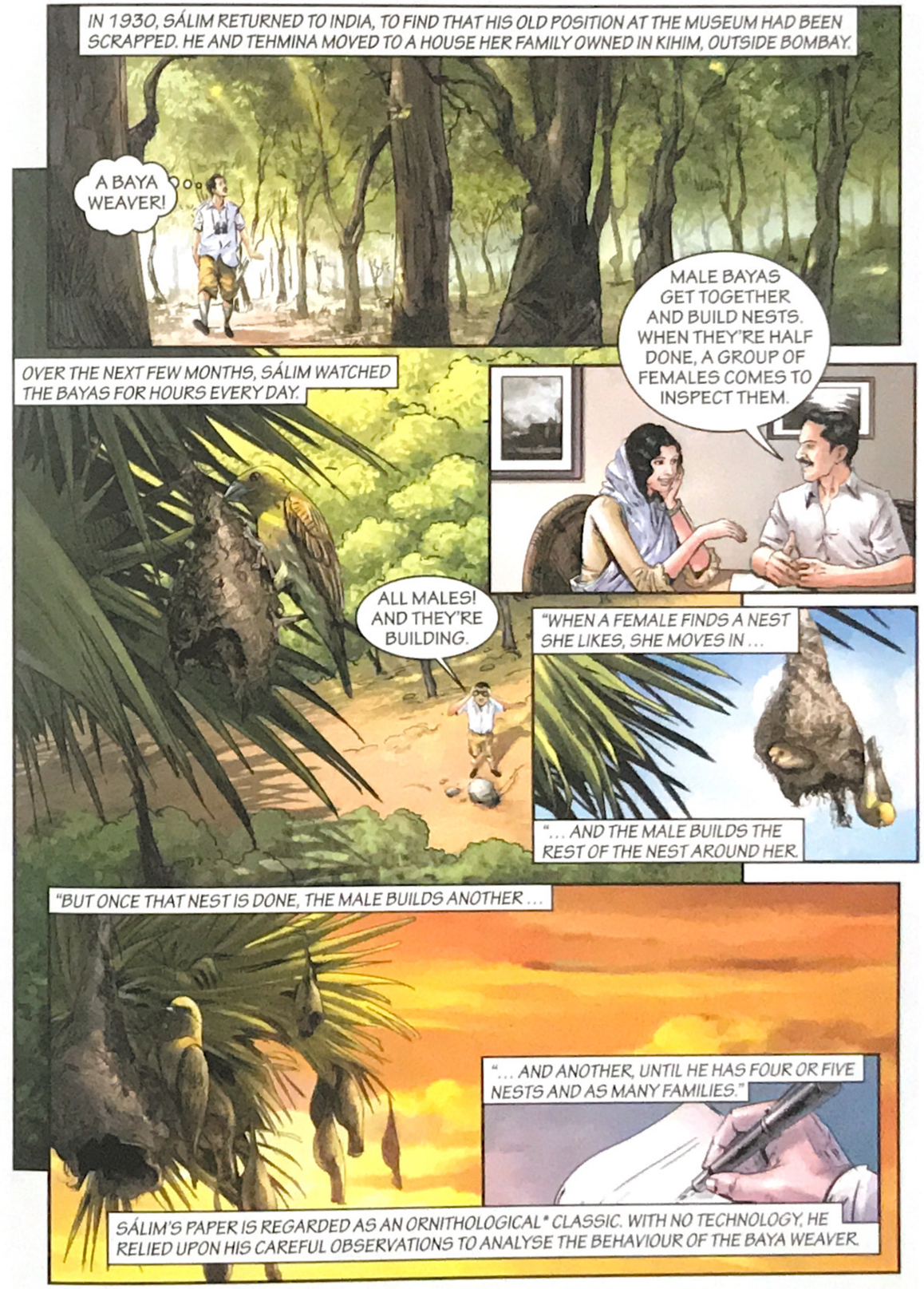
I AGREE. WHY DON'T YOU GO TO BOMBAY AND STUDY ACCOUNTANCY? WHEN YOU GRADUATE, YOU CAN COME BACK AND HELP WITH THE BUSINESS.



* HORIZONTAL PLANKS OF WOOD LAID UNDER RAILWAY TRACKS AS SUPPORT

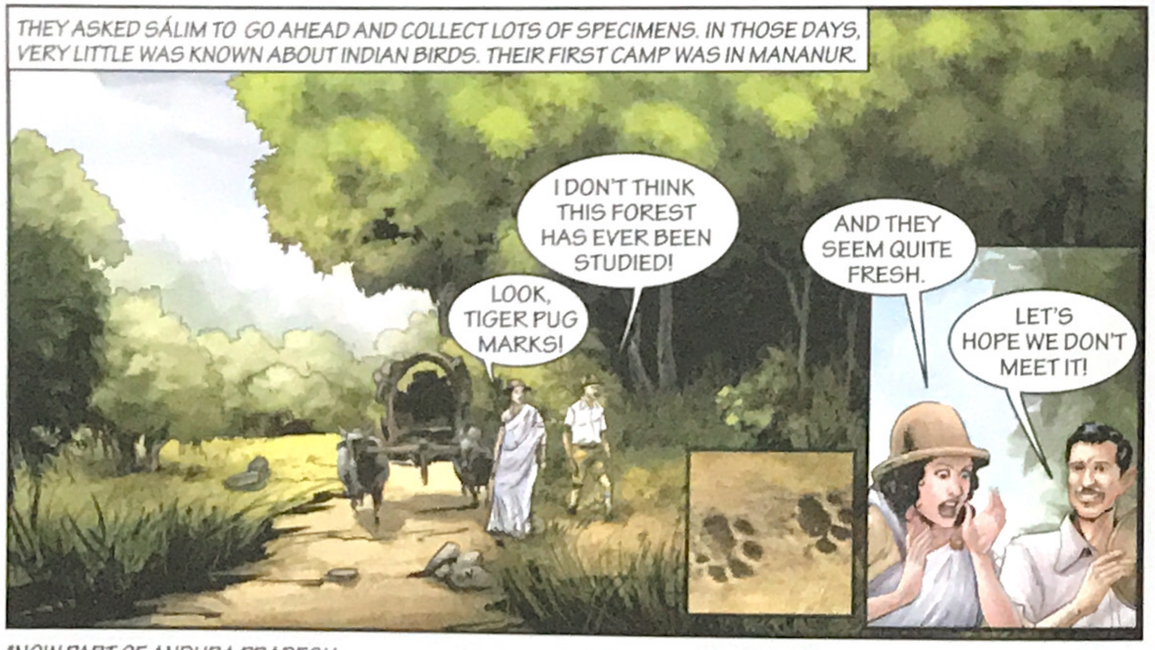

SÁLIM LOVED THE WOODED AREAS AROUND BOMBAY.
THIS LAKE ATTRACTS SO MANY BIRDS.
TEHMINA STARTED WORKING AT THE WOMEN'S COUNCIL. SÁLIM APPLIED FOR A JOB AT THE ZOOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA. BUT –
THEY GAVE THE JOB TO A MAN WITH A DEGREE. I NEVER REALISED HOW IMPORTANT THAT PIECE OF PAPER WOULD BE!
ONE DAY –
I'M PLANNING A TIGER SHOOT NEAR HYDERABAD. THE FORESTS ARE THICK AND QUITE UNEXPLORED.
I'D LIKE TO COME ALONG.
IT WAS HIS BROTHER-IN-LAW, SHUMS.
BUT A FEW DAYS LATER –
I'M SORRY, SHUMS. I CAN'T COME. THE MUSEUM IS OFFERING A JOB FOR A NATURALIST. I WANT TO APPLY.
MY COUSIN AZEEM AND I WILL GO, THEN. YOU CAN COME SOME OTHER TIME.
SÁLIM GOT THE JOB. SHORTLY AFTER, THE FAMILY GOT SOME VERY BAD NEWS INDEED.
POOR SHUMS! A TIGER HE SHOT TURNED ON HIM AND MAULED HIM TO DEATH. AZEEM MANAGED TO FIGHT IT OFF BARE-HANDED. HE IS IN HOSPITAL, RECOVERING.


IN THE MUSEUM, SÁLIM DESIGNED A SYLLABUS TO TEACH GROUPS OF STUDENTS ABOUT WILDLIFE AND ECOLOGY IN INDIA.
YOU CAN RECOGNISE THE HORNBILL BY ITS BEAK.
THERE IS SO MUCH MORE I HAVE TO LEARN ABOUT THESE BIRDS. I NEED TO STUDY THEM PROPERLY!
THAT NIGHT, SÁLIM DECIDED TO ACT ON AN IMPULSE.
WHO ARE YOU WRITING TO?
THE BERLIN UNIVERSITY, ASKING IF THEY'LL LET ME STUDY BIRDS AT THEIR MUSEUM.
AND SOON –
THEY WANT ME TO GO TO BERLIN! I WILL BE STUDYING WITH A PROFESSOR ERWIN STRESEMANN.
WHILE AT BERLIN, SÁLIM WENT TO HELIGOLAND, A SMALL ISLAND IN THE NORTH SEA. IT IS ON THE MIGRATION ROUTES OF MANY DIFFERENT BIRDS.
I CAN SEE HELIGOLAND'S LIGHTHOUSE, PROFESSOR STRESEMANN. THE LIGHT MUST ATTRACT MANY BIRDS EVERY NIGHT.
IT USED TO BE A BARREN ISLAND. OUR SCIENTISTS MADE POOLS OF WATER AND PLANTED TREES AND SHRUBS. BIRDS PASSING BY NOW LAND HERE.

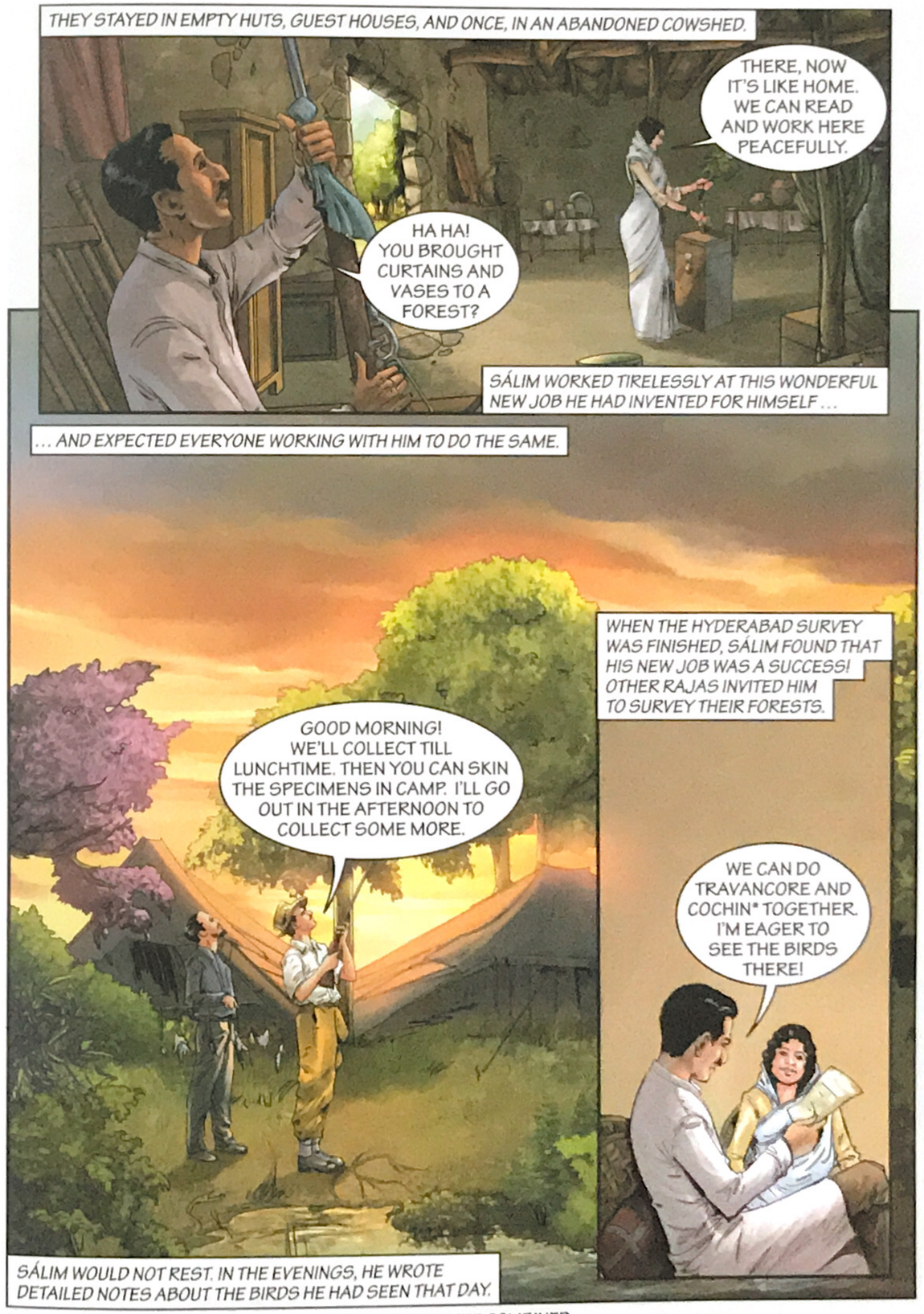


* ORNITHOLOGY IS THE STUDY OF BIRDS.

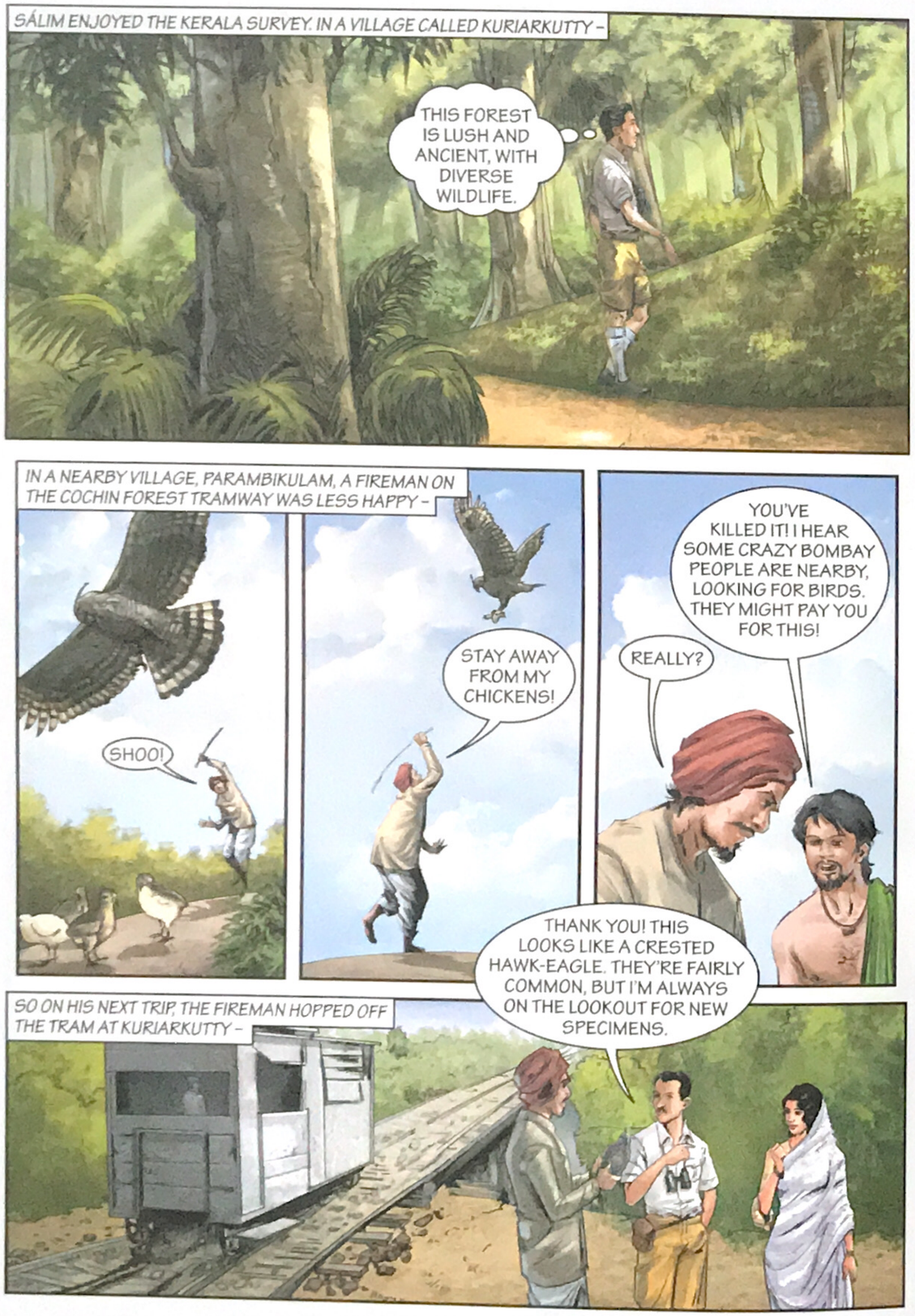
THE BNHS AND THE HYDERABAD GOVERNMENT AGREED TO HELP AND PAY EXPENSES. SÁLIM TOOK NO SALARY. HE WROTE TO PROFESSOR STRESEMANN AND TO AN ORNITHOLOGIST FRIEND, HUGH WHISTLER, ASKING FOR ADVICE.

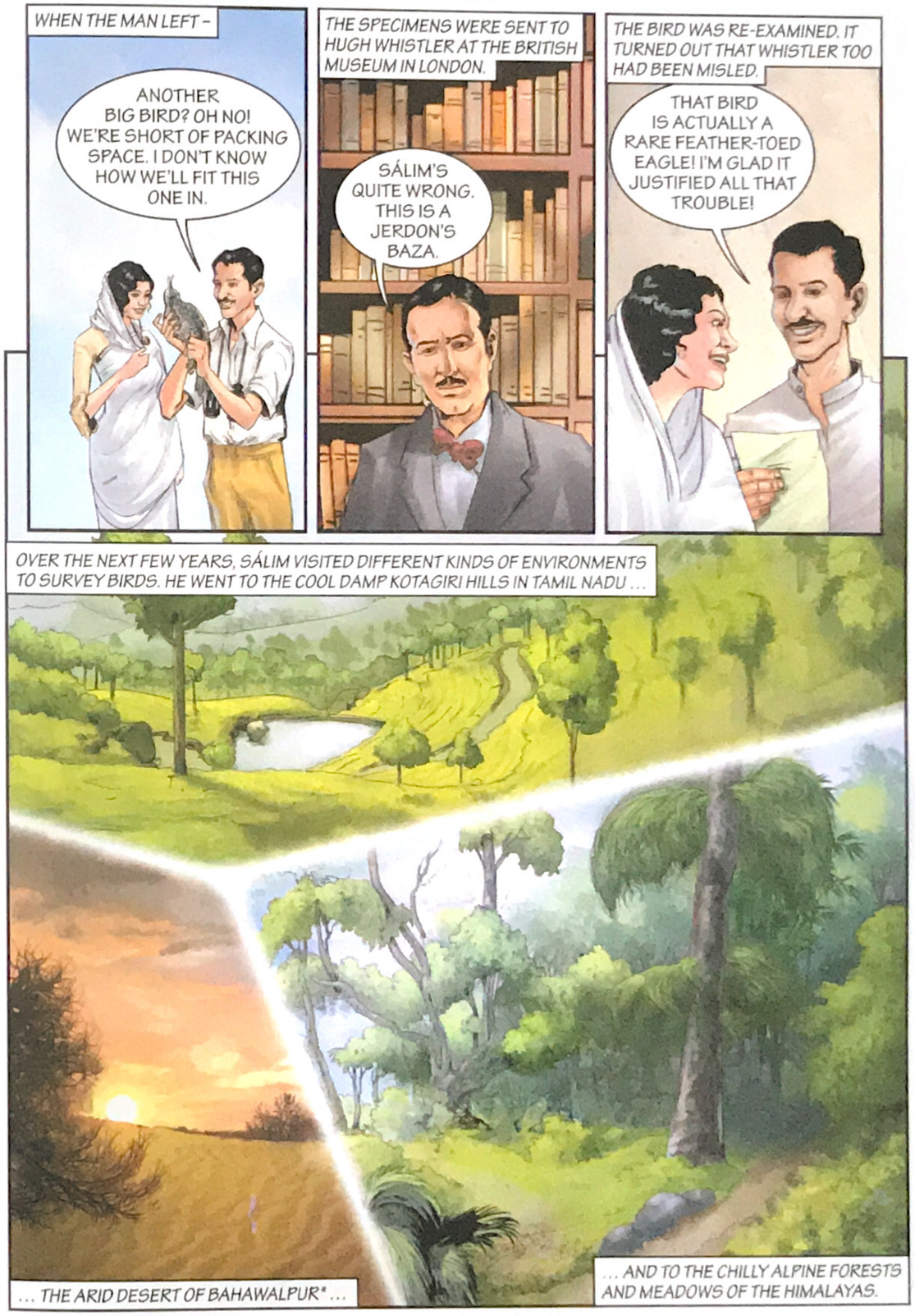


*NOW PART OF ANDHRA PRADESH

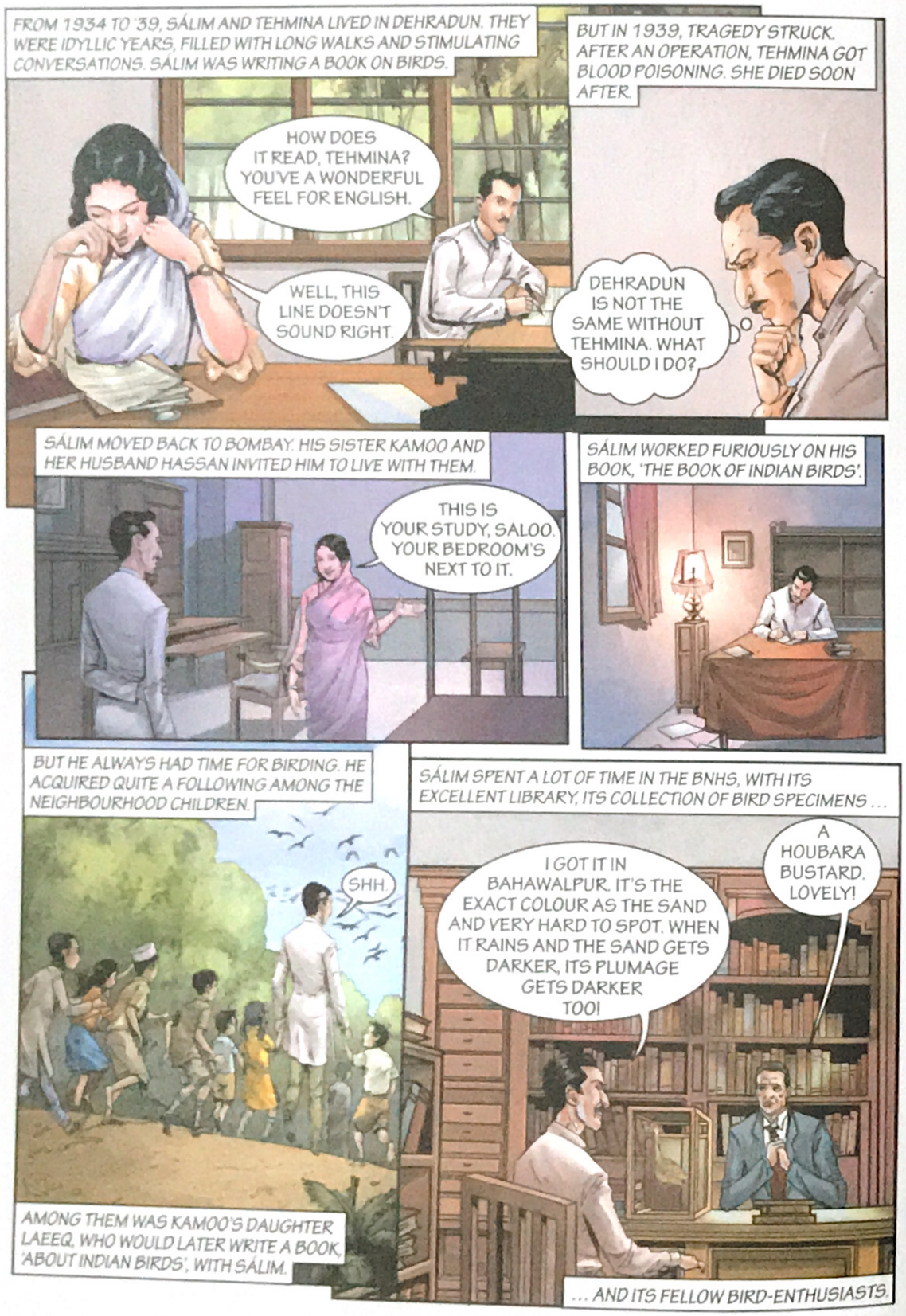


* THE PRINCELY STATES OF COCHIN AND TRAVANCORE WERE COMBINED INTO ONE STATE, KERALA, UPON INDEPENDENCE.

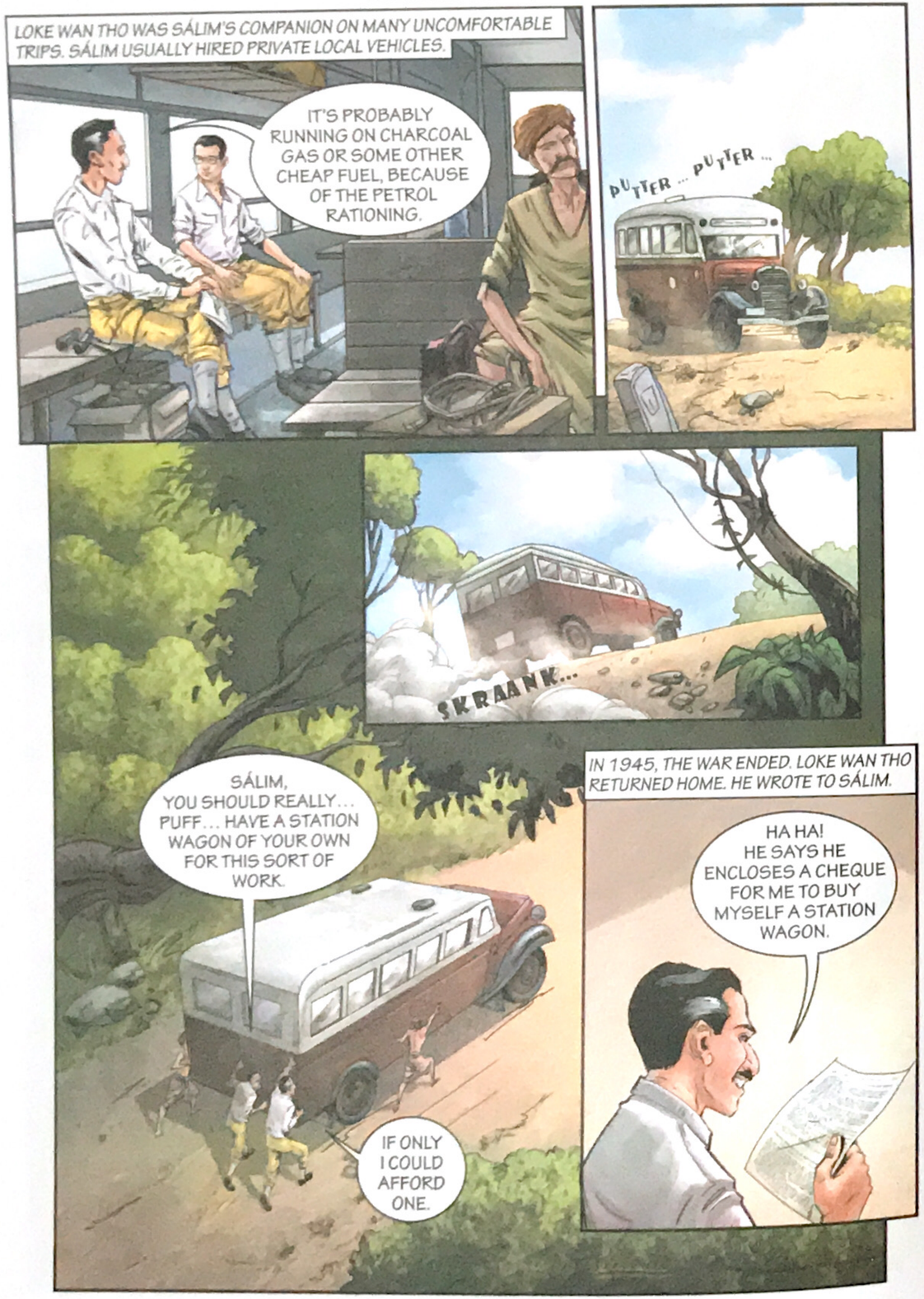


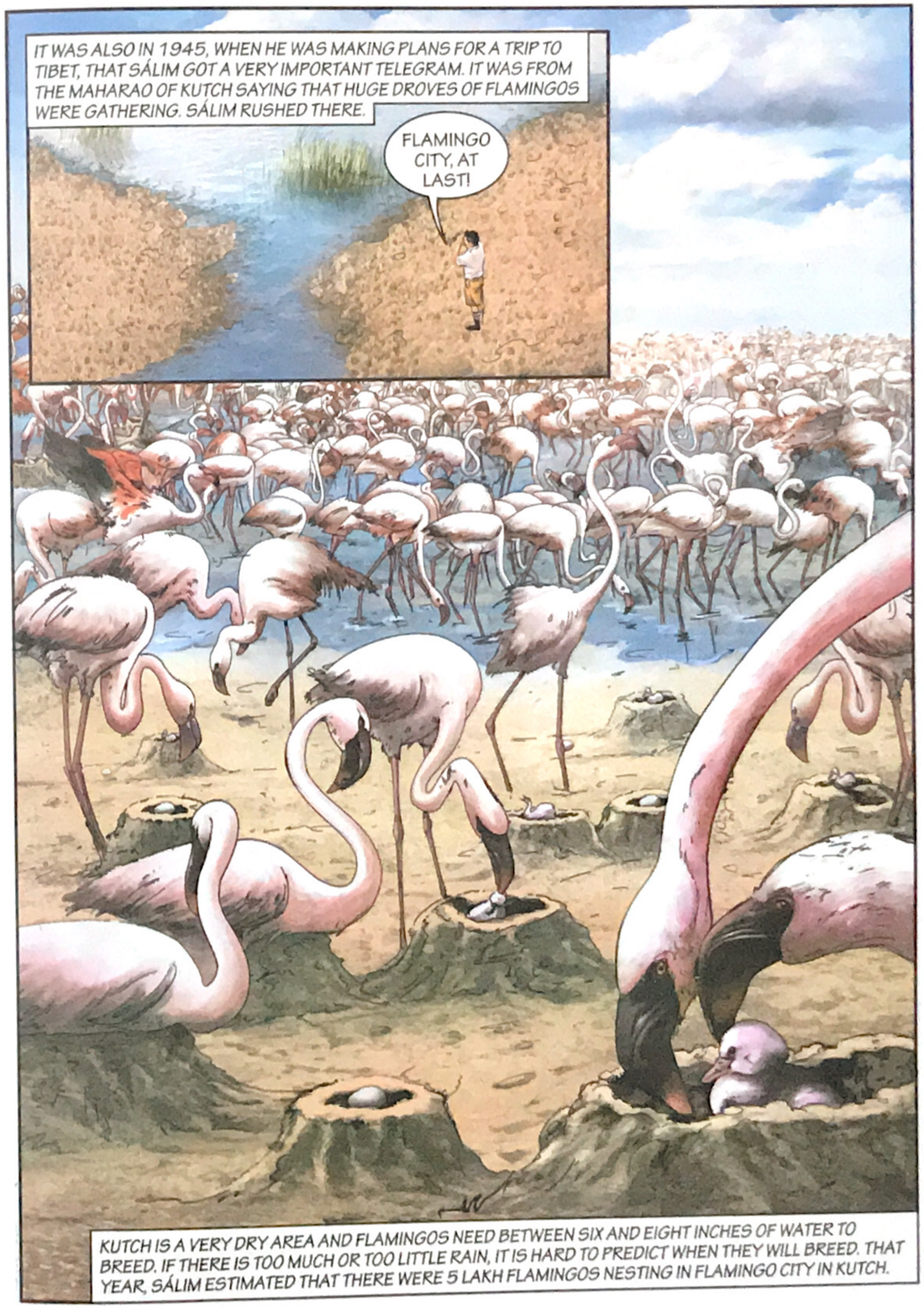


* NOW IN PAKISTAN


FROM 1934 TO '39, SÁLIM AND TEHMINA LIVED IN DEHRADUN. THEY WERE IDYLLIC YEARS, FILLED WITH LONG WALKS AND STIMULATING CONVERSATIONS. SÁLIM WAS WRITING A BOOK ON BIRDS.
HOW DOES IT READ, TEHMINA? YOU'VE A WONDERFUL FEEL FOR ENGLISH.
WELL, THIS LINE DOESN'T SOUND RIGHT.
BUT IN 1939, TRAGEDY STRUCK. AFTER AN OPERATION, TEHMINA GOT BLOOD POISONING. SHE DIED SOON AFTER.
DEHRADUN IS NOT THE SAME WITHOUT TEHMINA. WHAT SHOULD I DO?
SÁLIM MOVED BACK TO BOMBAY. HIS SISTER KAMOO AND HER HUSBAND HASSAN INVITED HIM TO LIVE WITH THEM.
THIS IS YOUR STUDY, SALOO. YOUR BEDROOM'S NEXT TO IT.
SÁLIM WORKED FURIOUSLY ON HIS BOOK, 'THE BOOK OF INDIAN BIRDS'.
BUT HE ALWAYS HAD TIME FOR BIRDING. HE ACQUIRED QUITE A FOLLOWING AMONG THE NEIGHBOURHOOD CHILDREN.
SHH.
AMONG THEM WAS KAMOO'S DAUGHTER LAEEQ, WHO WOULD LATER WRITE A BOOK, 'ABOUT INDIAN BIRDS', WITH SÁLIM.
SÁLIM SPENT A LOT OF TIME IN THE BNHS, WITH ITS EXCELLENT LIBRARY, ITS COLLECTION OF BIRD SPECIMENS ...
I GOT IT IN BAHAWALPUR. IT'S THE EXACT COLOUR AS THE SAND AND VERY HARD TO SPOT. WHEN IT RAINS AND THE SAND GETS DARKER, ITS PLUMAGE GETS DARKER TOO!
A HOUBARA BUSTARD. LOVELY!
... AND ITS FELLOW BIRD-ENTHUSIASTS.

WHILE IN BOMBAY, SÁLIM MET LOKE WAN THO, A CHINESE BUSINESSMAN, WHO HAD TO FLEE SINGAPORE WHEN THE JAPANESE TOOK IT IN 1942.
LOKE WAN THO'S A BIRD PHOTOGRAPHER, SÁLIM. HE'S VERY INTERESTED IN YOUR WORK.
SÁLIM INVITED LOKE WAN THO FOR A KUTCH SURVEY IN 1943. IT WAS HARD WORK. WORLD WAR II WAS ON AND PETROL WAS RATIONED.
MAHARAO VIJAYARAJI, THE RULER OF KUTCH, WAS AN ENTHUSIASTIC HUNTER AND NATURALIST. HE INVITED SÁLIM TO CHAT WITH HIM IN THE EVENINGS.
YOU MUST SEE THE FLAMINGOS THE NEXT TIME THEY GATHER HERE.
YES, I SEEM TO HAVE MISSED THE BREEDING SEASON THIS YEAR.


LOKE WAN THO WAS SÁLIM'S COMPANION ON MANY UNCOMFORTABLE TRIPS. SÁLIM USUALLY HIRED PRIVATE LOCAL VEHICLES.
IT'S PROBABLY RUNNING ON CHARCOAL GAS OR SOME OTHER CHEAP FUEL, BECAUSE OF THE PETROL RATIONING.
PUTTER ... PUTTER ...
SKRAANK...
SÁLIM, YOU SHOULD REALLY... PUFF... HAVE A STATION WAGON OF YOUR OWN FOR THIS SORT OF WORK.
IF ONLY I COULD AFFORD ONE.
IN 1945, THE WAR ENDED. LOKE WAN THO RETURNED HOME. HE WROTE TO SÁLIM.
HA HA! HE SAYS HE ENCLOSES A CHEQUE FOR ME TO BUY MYSELF A STATION WAGON.


IT WAS ALSO IN 1945, WHEN HE WAS MAKING PLANS FOR A TRIP TO TIBET, THAT SÁLIM GOT A VERY IMPORTANT TELEGRAM. IT WAS FROM THE MAHARAO OF KUTCH SAYING THAT HUGE DROVES OF FLAMINGOS WERE GATHERING. SÁLIM RUSHED THERE.
FLAMINGO CITY, AT LAST!
KUTCH IS A VERY DRY AREA AND FLAMINGOS NEED BETWEEN SIX AND EIGHT INCHES OF WATER TO BREED. IF THERE IS TOO MUCH OR TOO LITTLE RAIN, IT IS HARD TO PREDICT WHEN THEY WILL BREED. THAT YEAR, SÁLIM ESTIMATED THAT THERE WERE 5 LAKH FLAMINGOS NESTING IN FLAMINGO CITY IN KUTCH.

LATER THAT YEAR, SÁLIM TREKKED TO TIBET, TO MOUNT KAILASH AND LAKE MANASAROVAR. WITH HIM WAS PRITAM, THE SON OF A FAMILY FRIEND.

I'M SORRY PRITAM, BUT MY FRIEND LOKE WAN THO IS DOWN WITH DYSENTERY AND CAN'T MAKE IT.

IT'LL BE LIKE WHEN YOU USED TO TAKE ME BIRDING AROUND DEHRADUN.

AS THE WEEKS WENT BY, PRITAM BECAME QUIET AND WITHDRAWN.

I THINK THE HIGH ALTITUDE IS MAKING YOU ILL, PRITAM. PERHAPS YOU SHOULD TURN BACK?

OF COURSE NOT! I'M FINE.

PRITAM INSISTED, BUT HE WAS SO SILENT THAT SÁLIM CUT THE TRIP SHORT, TURNING BACK AT LAKE MANASAROVAR.

SÁLIM SUFFERED FROM VERTIGO - SOMETIMES HEIGHTS MADE HIM DIZZY - BUT HE WAS SO ENTHRALLED BY THE BIRD LIFE HE HARDLY NOTICED. ON ONE OCCASION –

WHAT A LOVELY YELLOW-NAPED YUHINA!

SÁLIM TURNED...

OH!

... AND REALISED THAT HE WAS MERE INCHES FROM FALLING DOWN.

NEAR MANASAROVAR, THEY STOPPED AT A LAKE CALLED DING TSO.

WHAT LOVELY BIRDS THEY ARE, THESE BLACK-NECKED CRANES!

SÁLIM'S GUIDE, GELONG, WAS LESS ENTHRALLED.

BE CAREFUL!

OH, GELONG! YOU PANICKED ABOUT BANDITS ALL THE WAY, AND NOW YOU THINK I'LL DROWN.

YOU MUST TURN BACK! THERE MAY BE QUICKSAND!

BUT I HAVE TO GET A GREBE'S NEST!

SUDDENLY, SÁLIM FOUND THAT THE MOUND HE WAS STANDING ON WAS NOT AS STABLE AS HE'D THOUGHT –

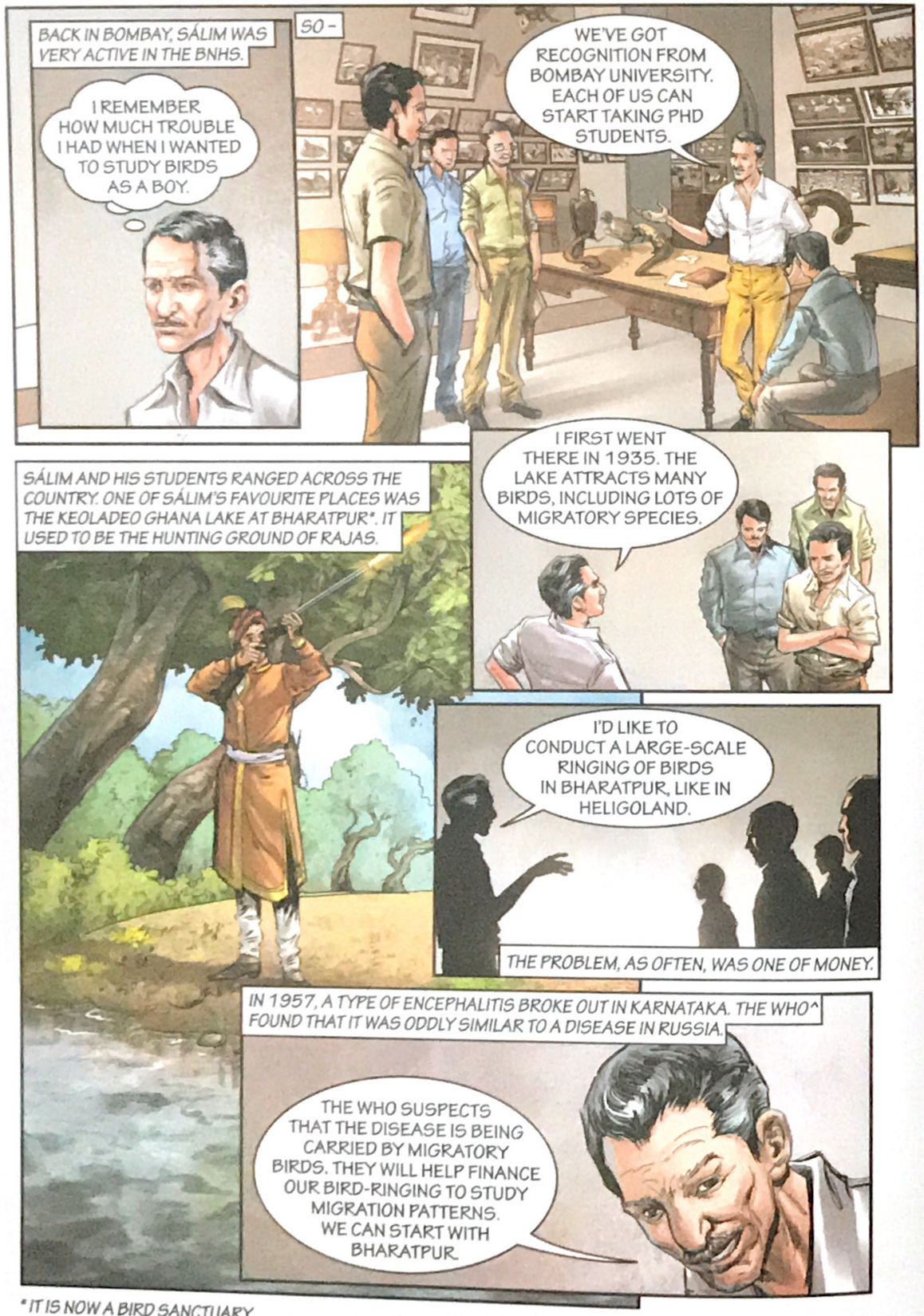
SPLASH

HE CAUGHT SIGHT OF A MOUND FLOATING AWAY...

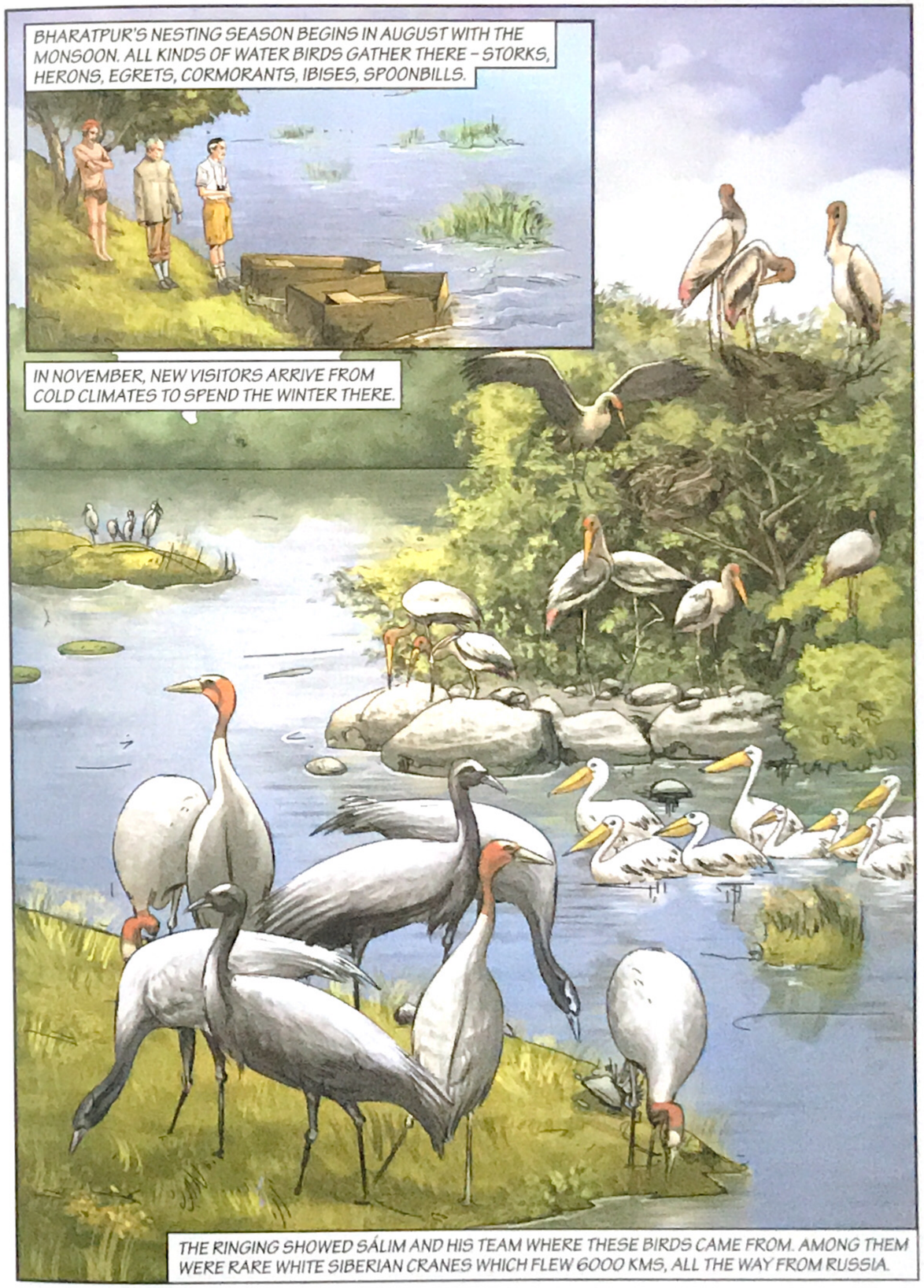
... AND LEAPT TOWARDS IT.

BRRR... PERHAPS I SHOULD TAKE GELONG'S WARNINGS MORE SERIOUSLY.
GELONG TURNED OUT TO BE RIGHT ABOUT THE BANDITS TOO, FOR ON THEIR WAY –
RUSTLE...
WHAT WAS THAT?
OY!
IT WAS A BANDIT. AT THAT TIME, THE MANASAROVAR AREA WAS FULL OF BANDITS WAITING TO ROB PILGRIMS.
SHHH, I HAVE AN IDEA.
SÁLIM BHAI! LET'S RUN AND ESCAPE THIS BAD MAN.
HAND ME MY SHOOTING STICK, GELONG!
SÁLIM'S SHOOTING STICK WAS ACTUALLY A FOLDING CHAIR.

GELONG OBEYED.
SÁLIM TOOK A CARTRIDGE FROM HIS POCKET ...
... AND LOADED HIS PRETEND GUN.
THE BANDIT TURNED AND WALKED AWAY.
OH NO!
TAKE THAT YOU...!
THAT WAS LUCKY, SÁLIM BHAI!
LET'S HOPE HE DOESN'T REALISE HE WAS TRICKED.



*IT IS NOW A BIRD SANCTUARY.
^WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION



QUIETLY, SÁLIM ALI HAD BECOME FAMOUS. THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE READ HIS 'BOOK OF INDIAN BIRDS', AND WERE INSPIRED BY HIS LOVE FOR NATURE. AMONG THEM WAS JAWAHARLAL NEHRU* WHO READ IT IN DEHRADUN JAIL IN 1942.

HE ASKED SÁLIM TO AUTOGRAPH IT ...

... AND SENT IT TO HIS DAUGHTER, INDIRA, IN NAINI JAIL^.

I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED ANIMALS, BUT I KNOW LITTLE ABOUT BIRDS. NOW, FOR THE FIRST TIME, I'M PAYING ATTENTION TO THEIR SONGS!

SÁLIM WROTE MANY BOOKS AND BEGAN TO GET RECOGNITION. IN 1967, HE GOT THE J PAUL GETTY WILDLIFE CONSERVATION PRIZE OF $ 100,000. HE USED IT TO FORM THE SÁLIM ALI CONSERVATION FUND.

THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT GAVE HIM THE PADMA BHUSHAN IN 1958, AND IN 1976, HE WAS AWARDED THE PADMA VIBHUSHAN.

IN THE 1970S, WHEN INDIRA GANDHI WAS PRIME MINISTER, THE GOVERNMENT PROPOSED A DAM IN SILENT VALLEY, KERALA, THAT WOULD SUBMERGE THE RAINFOREST. PROTESTS BROKE OUT. SÁLIM WAS A PART OF THEM.

SILENT VALLEY IS UNDOUBTEDLY ONE OF INDIA'S MOST ECOLOGICALLY VALUABLE AREAS AND MUST BE PRESERVED.

THE PROTESTS WORKED AND SILENT VALLEY IS NOW A NATIONAL PARK.

* IN 1947 HE WOULD BECOME INDIA'S FIRST PRIME MINISTER.

^ IN ALLAHABAD, UTTAR PRADESH

FAME MADE VERY LITTLE DIFFERENCE TO SÁLIM. EVEN AT 90, THOUGH INCREASINGLY SUFFERING FROM DEAFNESS, THE 'OLD MAN', AS HIS STUDENTS FONDLY CALLED HIM, CONTINUED TO WALK ACROSS THE ROUGHEST AND LONELIEST TERRAIN, WATCHING THE BIRDS HE ADORED SO MUCH.

SÁLIM ALI DIED IN 1987, AT THE AGE OF 91. HE LEFT BEHIND HIM A LEGACY OF READERS AND STUDENTS, OF PEOPLE WHO VALUED, STUDIED AND PROTECTED THE NATURAL WORLD.